



Invitation to a Refreshing Partnership
By William H. Lawson, Jr.

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Acceptance of Jesus' Great Invitation, "Come unto me,"¹ is not defined by the books we carry, the verses we quote, or the organizations we join, but by the way we love.

Normalization of prolific mass shootings and protected gun violence, rollback of women's rights, violent rhetoric against our LGBTQ community, and racist adjudication of the death penalty are among the most recent setbacks for humanity in general and our nation in particular. As wearisome as our resistance may sometimes seem, we remember the encouragement of St. Paul through the Galatians,² as expressed by Charles Gabriel in his hymn, "Let us not grow weary in the work of love."³

Christ invites us to join together in an eternal partnership, overcoming the heartbreaks and injustices of the world by ministering the healing kindness and goodness of God's love. How refreshing it must have been to see and hear Jesus exemplify and teach, revealing the true nature of God in contrast with what those who were professing traditional orthodoxy were practicing and proclaiming! How refreshing it is for us today to hear the Great Invitation as an opportunity to join Jesus in making this world a better place, even as we look forward to the life of the world to come!

The Great Invitation is open to all whenever anyone is ready to accept it.

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (*Matthew 11:28 KJV*)

I used to preach on Thursday nights at a gospel mission, where the congregants were required to attend the worship service in exchange for a hot meal and a night's lodging afterward. I always felt like listening to me was the awful price they had to pay. It reminds me, though, of the wonderful invitation Isaiah spoke on behalf of God, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and [you who have] no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."⁴ Since then, I have advocated for assistance without compelled religious obligations. But, a beautiful mural covered an entire wall of the large room in that mission where the service was held and the meals were served. Stretching clear across the mural were painted the words, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden." And a lot of people did come to Christ through the ministries of that mission and the efforts of its volunteers.

"Come unto me," Jesus calls out to all who are tired from carrying life's heavy loads. The Great Invitation resounds to the victims of injustice and the advocates of resistance. To all whose lives are torn apart and weighed down by war, poverty, forced migration, slave labor, human trafficking, exploitation, and all the other forms of abusive oppression and injustice, the Great Invitation is extended. "Come unto me," Jesus persuades us when we feel like progress is futile, and our own contributions seem so insignificant. "Come unto me," Jesus urges amid political misinformation and religious capitulation that drains, discourages, and disheartens. "Come unto me," Jesus enthusiastically invites all who are excluded from full participation in the life and ministry of the Church. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The Great Invitation is extended to everyone, everywhere, for all time and eternity. To those named in the Judgment of the Nations:⁵ the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, Jesus beckons saying, "Come unto me." The invitation goes out to all whom Jesus named in the Beatitudes:⁶

The poor in spirit...
 They that mourn...
 The meek...
 They which do hunger and thirst after righteousness...
 The merciful...
 The pure in heart...
 The peacemakers...
 The persecuted.

And to us. Jesus invites us all to continue responding to the Great Invitation by going to Christ with each day's issues, burdens, difficulties, and struggles. "Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there,"⁷ as Charles Albert Tindley wrote in his hymn.

The Great Invitation also speaks to the way religious and secular laws and rules are written, interpreted, and applied. The *New Testament Lexicon* defines the word translated *laden* in this passage as a metaphor "to load one with a burden of rites and unwarranted precepts."⁸ Jim Crow laws come to mind, along with modern-day versions of voter suppression and other racist legislation. Undue hardships on women's reproductive health come to mind. For the church, the phrase "incompatible with Christian teaching"⁹ comes to mind. Jesus directly addressed the ways oppression is institutionalized and legislated when he said,

For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on [people's] shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.¹⁰

The *rest* Jesus promises in the Great Invitation is a refreshing calmness that enables us to recover from our labors as God did after Creation and later referenced in giving the Ten Commandments.¹¹ It is the renewing calm and tranquility of faith in God's ever-present love and blessing as described in the book of Hebrews.¹² It is the restoration of which the Psalmist wrote, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul."¹³ In his hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,"¹⁴ Charles Wesley wrote,

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit
 into every troubled breast,
 Let us all in thee inherit,
 let us find that second rest.

Jesus continued the invitation,

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.¹⁵

The roles in the work of love to which Jesus invites us are not burdensome, nor do we work alone. We work together with Christ and each other under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. We minister the spiritual gifts she distributes to empower us individually and collectively. Each

is doing our own small part together. Jesus promised, “[Even] greater works than these shall [we] do.”¹⁶ That’s because Jesus is here to help us, always.

God’s rest begins within our souls.

For I delight in the law of God after the inward [person]. (*Romans 7:22 KJV*)

This “inner being,” as the Good News Translation phrases it, is our truest self, made in the image of God. There is so much to be discovered and explored within ourselves, each other, and all people. But then our inward person gets covered up with all this other clutter.

Many people, maybe even most people, do express some form of belief in the Deity and love and peace. But there’s all this cloudiness and murkiness stirred up by some to divide people against each other for selfish and oppressive purposes. But there’s also a divisiveness within our own hearts and minds, as Paul addresses in this passage as phrased in The Message, “I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway.”¹⁷

We need to give ourselves and each other the space to grow spiritually from the innermost person. Paul set an example on Mars Hill by respecting other religions and cultures even as he introduced Christ. We “delight in the law of God” – the law of love as Christ taught. We can peacefully encourage others on their path to Christ, whom we believe to ultimately be “the way, the truth, and the life,”¹⁸ trusting God’s grace to lead them as God’s grace has led us. We support others in their spirituality by cultivating our own spirituality in faith and practice and by working to more fully implement the teachings of Jesus in our lives and relationships.

Christ unites us with all Creation in one harmonious relationship of blessing and praise.

All thy works shall praise thee, O Lord; and thy saints shall bless thee. (*Psalms 145:10 KJV*)

Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations. (*Psalms 145:13 KJV*)

Jesus said even the stones could praise God.¹⁹ Consider anything God has made “the works of God’s hands,” and all of them singularly or *en masse* glorify God and reveal the divine goodness of our Creator. Paul affirmed that the whole of nature bears witness to the glory of God. He wrote in the Good News Translation, “Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made.”²⁰

God intends to provide peaceful restoration to all Creation.

He shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. (*Zechariah 9:10b KJV*)

Jesus referred to the Old Testament prophets in the Beatitudes, saying, “Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”²¹ These prophets drew the ire of the religious people of their day because, like that of Jesus, their interpretation was diametrically opposed to the prevailing thought and practice. They, like Jesus, preached gentleness, kindness, justice, and fairness in direct

contradiction to the harshness and condemnation, vengeance and violence, and self-righteous prohibitions rampant throughout much of the religious community. We can interpret Scripture in two ways: through love as Jesus taught -- or not. Prophesying about the coming Messiah, Zechariah foresaw the peaceful and everlasting kingdom Isaiah described:

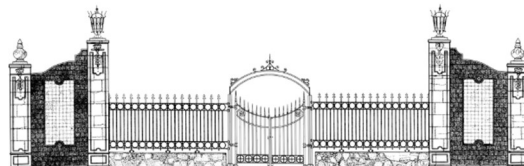
For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.²²

Conclusion

Isn't this what we want: Peace in our hearts, peace in our land, peace around the world? Imagine how it would be if God's love were perfected in our personal lives and relationships. Imagine how it would be if our community, state, and nation were ultimately governed by perfect love. Imagine an entire world brought together in peace and love for everyone. This is the vision of Christ for the whole of humanity that we would love one another as Christ has loved us.²³ Jesus invites you, me, and everyone else to join in a divine partnership of spreading peace and love. Isn't that refreshing?

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.²⁴

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



The Great Invitation

Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson on July 9, 2023, at Briensburg UMC
Bible Readings for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary
Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-14; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Notes

- ¹ Matthew 11:28 (KJV).
- ² Galatians 6:9.
- ³ Charles H. Gabriel. "Send the Light," 1890. *Hymnary*. https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_call_comes_ringing_oer_the_rest 6 July 2023.
- ⁴ Isaiah 55:1 (KJV).
- ⁵ Matthew 25:31-46.
- ⁶ Matthew 5:2-10 (KJV).
- ⁷ Charles Albert Tindley. "Leave it There," 1906. *Hymnary*. https://hymnary.org/text/if_the_world_from_you_withhold_of_its_si 8 July 2023.
- ⁸ Thayer and Smith. "Greek Lexicon entry for Phortizo." The KJV New Testament Greek Lexicon. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/phortizo.html> 8 July 2023.
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- ¹⁰ Matthew 23:4 (KJV).
- ¹¹ Exodus 20:11.
- ¹² Hebrews 4:9-11.
- ¹³ Psalm 23: 2-3 (KJV).
- ¹⁴ Charles Wesley. "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," 1747. *The United Methodist Church*. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/love-divine-all-loves-excelling-by-charles-wesley> 8 July 2023.
- ¹⁵ Matthew 28:29-30 (KJV).
- ¹⁶ John 14:12 (KJV).
- ¹⁷ Romans 7:19 (MSG).
- ¹⁸ John 14:6 (KJV).
- ¹⁹ Luke 19:40 (KJV).

²⁰ Romans 1:20 (GNT).

²¹ Matthew 5:12 (KJV).

²² Isaiah 9:6-7 (KJV).

²³ John 13:34.

²⁴ Matthew 11:28 (KJV).

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